



What's Wrong with "Judeo-Christian"?

Background

The historical origin of "Judeo-Christian" as a conceptual framework is complex and multifaceted. It has been used to create both a theological linkage between Judaism and Christianity, as well as an ethno-cultural linkage between Jews and Christians. Many Christian leaders who employed the phrase theologically viewed Judaism as the contributing root of Christianity, while regarding Christianity as the superior religion that perfected Judaism. These Christians often disregarded or outright rejected the value of modern-day Jewish practice.

During the 20th century, "Judeo-Christian" was used by both pluralists and anti-pluralists for different purposes and to advance contradicting views on the role of religion in politics. It was also used by some Jewish community leaders to establish common cause with Christians during the rise of Hitler in order to advocate for U.S. intervention in World War II. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, secularism was framed as a threat to democracy and a gateway to both totalitarianism and communism. The latter narrative reached a fever pitch during the height of McCarthyism in the 1950s. During this time, anti-secularist and anti-atheist rhetoric was rampant, the words "under God" were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance, and the national motto was changed to "In God We Trust" from the original, *E Pluribus Unum*—"out of many, one."¹

Today

The "Judeo-Christian" framework is not often used by modern-day pluralists but is deeply embedded in the language of Christian nationalists who seek to establish Christianity as the dominant political, cultural, and social force in society. Conflating American identity with Christian identity, Christian nationalists have propagated the myth of the United States' founding as a Christian nation based on "Judeo-Christian" tradition in order to advance their agenda, which includes (but is not limited to): undermining access to reproductive healthcare, rolling back nondiscrimination laws that protect the LGBTQ community and religious minorities, advancing a dominionistic worldview that hinders action on the climate crisis, undermining the critical role of science and evidence in policymaking, and imposing sectarian curricula in our secular public schools.

¹ Gaston, Dr. K. Healan. *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

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Our Concerns: Why We Want to Reframe the Narrative

- **“Judeo-Christian” is *not* an inclusive phrase.** It excludes the teachings and values of all other religions and the nonreligious, while implying the supremacy of Judaism and Christianity. That is not an accurate picture of today’s pluralistic American society.
- **It is used to support a regressive social agenda.** Those employing the phrase, predominately Christian nationalists, are seeking to enshrine into law one set of religious ideological beliefs over *all* Americans, regardless of our beliefs. For example, the stated mission of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers seeks to “formulate [laws] based upon a Biblical worldview” and “rebuilding the foundation of our Judeo-Christian heritage.”²
- **It co-opts our community while misrepresenting the values most of us stand for.** Christian Nationalists use “Judeo-Christian” to create a veneer of inclusivity and universality, despite having few Jewish supporters of their agenda. Some Jews may support a politically conservative social agenda, but for an overwhelming majority of American Jewry (80% or more), our Jewish tradition supports women’s rights, reproductive freedom, LGBTQ equality, science-based environmental policies, racial justice, and secular education in our schools.
- **Jews support the separation of church and state.** Almost all recent utterances of the phrase “Judeo-Christian” are to endorse Christian-nationalist legislation or political policy, but American Jews overwhelmingly support the First Amendment right to a secular government that does not privilege one religion over others, or religion over no religion.

Through education and advocacy, we seek to restore the neutral, secular nature of our government to protect freedom of religion and freedom *from* religion for Americans of all faiths and no faith.

Call to Action

- Sign the Jews for a Secular Democracy open letter about “Judeo-Christian” at <http://jfasd.org/judeochristian>.
- Educate members of your community and allies in the interfaith community, particular Christian allies and elected representatives.
- Counter religious leaders, organizations, and politicians when they say “Judeo-Christian” to justify a Christian nationalist agenda.

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² For more examples, visit <https://jfasd.org/judeochristian/>